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ABSTRACT

The transition from an industrial to a postindustrial society presents problems of unemployment, inflation, business failures, and high debt and interest rates. Additionally, this transition exerts a severe impact on individuals and the family unit. The family is shaped by political, economic, and social forces and in turn shapes these dynamics. Attempts have been made to rejuvenate personal and familial capacities and community enterprise. One organization devoted to such rejuvenation is the Vanier Institute of the Family, a group that monitors social changes in family and community life and promotes the well-being of Canadian families. Changes in family life that affect society are reflected in the labor force, business interactions, household attitudes, and community activities. The result of these changes is that the current cash economy is misperceived as the whole economy. Learning more about informal economy and establishing policies to encourage development may resolve the crisis of the welfare state. In general, people are becoming more self-reliant and developing interpersonal support systems based on cooperative relationships and new technologies. (BJD)

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CANADIAN FAMILIES: VICTIMS OR VEHICLES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

by

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Canadian Families: Victims or Vehicles of Social Change

by

William A. Dyson

We are now in the process of moving from one era to ancther, from an industrial society to a post-industrial society. In the transition to this society, we are experiencing many difficult problems -- high unemployment, constant inflation, increasing business failures, high interest rates, and massive consumer, corporate and governmental debt.

This societal crisis is also having severe impacts on people and on society's basic social and economic unit -- the family. More and more families and individual persons are struggling to make ends meet on modest and often inadequate incomes from such sources as marginal employment, unemployment insurance, pensions, retirement savings, and social assistance.

There are many indications that families are breaking down because of the tremendous stress of our modern industrial way of life, particularly now with lack of sufficient work and income. For two decades there has been a significant rising increase in the rates of divorce and separation, and violence within families is on the rise. One child in three today lives in or will live most or some of his childhood in a single-parent home whether from a poor or a well-off home. From this perspective, the family and its members are often viewed as victims of social and economic change.

What we are seeing -- in fact living through -- all of us -- is an era of widespread, fundamental and all encompassing change. All modern industrial nations, East and West, are experiencing this gigantic shift. We are all witnesses and active participants in a culture, a way of life, that is on one hand eroding and on the other recreating, rebuilding and inventing another way of life. The core building blocks are people and their living patterns, -- to wit, us and our families.

There is a broader, more comprehensive perspective from which to look at the family. You can say, yes, the family is affected for ill or good by change, but the family also adapts and responds to change. In other words, the family is shaped by political, economic and social forces, and in turn, shapes these dynamics.

Many families and individual persons are responding to the current economic crisis in very creative ways. They are, aware or unaware, laying down the foundations for the emerging post-industrial society whatever that may be. People, within the family and community context, are adopting a variety of personal and collective strategies to cope with the fundamental shifts in our economic and social structures. Great attempts are being made to rejuvenate personal and familial abilities and capacities, and to develop self-reliant and co-operative modes of community enterprise.

The work of the Vanier Institute of the Family is directed towards understanding how the family influences, and is influenced by the economic and social fabric of life. The Institute is not a service agency. It

is somewhat like the National Conference Board, in that, it monitors what is going on in society, but does so specifically in relation to family and community life. The mandate of the Institute is to promote the well-being of Canadian familial life. It makes recommendations accordingly to governments, labour unions, business, churches, social organizations, family agencies, and to other sectors of society.

The Institute is unique in the world. No other country has an organization that monitors and interprets the interrelationships between society and familial life. Governor General Georges P. Vanier founded the Institute in 1965. While he was Governor General in the later 1950s, he concluded that modern industrial society had run its course and was approaching the down-turn as a way of life. His view was that to handle this downturn and find a path to another society, we could not simply enact new laws or await and depend on the guidance of some wise political or other leader at home or abroad.

He believed that the burden of the changes would have to be borne by us in our daily lives. And the place where our daily life mainly happens is in the familial setting. This is why Governor General Vanier set up the Institute. He believed that people had the capability and the responsibility to shape the future in new directions that could improve the quality of their lives. Said concisely, the Bank of Canada may have a primary concern about inflation, but when all is said and done, it is lived out in our own heavy or slim pocketbooks. And while major solutions are sought, each of us had to make the day to day decisions on how to hold the line, cutback or make it better for ourselves.

Before I go on to talk about some of the Institute's current preoccupations and about how families and persons can shape the future, I would like to explain the Institute's concept of the family. We use the word familial because family means much more than a mother, father, and 1.6 children. There are many forms of family relationships that extend beyond the nuclear family. Familial life includes relatives (the extended family), friends, and neighbors. It can include all of our interpersonal, face-to-face relationships at home, in the community, at work, at study, at church and at play.

These relationships make up what the Institute calls the familial side of society. It is a society that places a high value on caring and sharing. These two vital components of life are created in the family, lived in the community, and extended to the region, the nation, even to our wonderful planet.

We tend to forget that family life is the foundation on which the economic and social structures of any society rest. The air and water, we've taken it for granted. All of our basic learning takes place in the family. It is the place where language and understanding are first learned. It is where we learn our basic perceptions of reality, attitudes, traditions, values and skills. Our personalities and aptitude are developed in the family. Since the family affects, for better or worse, how we live and work, it gives the basic shape to our society.

The process of learning is one of the Institute's primary areas of interest. We have had a number of study programs aimed at

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re-understanding learning. Most of us have thought that learning goes on mainly in educational institutions. But, in reality, more than 75 per cent of all learning happens outside schools. This includes the learning within the family, and the learning that takes place among friends, neighbors, and co-workers whether you're the janitor or the company manager. We learn by exchanging ideas and sharing views at lunch and conference tables, in bars, on church steps, in office hallways, in all sorts of places - even at Canadian Club luncheons. It is important to understand the vital roles played by family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers in the process of learning. Without all the informal learning that goes on in familial and other interpersonal relationships, our society would be less innovative and would be less able to cope and to adpat to change.

Dr. Elise Boulding, a prominent North American thinker on the subjects of family, women, social change, and learning, has said: "The family is the adaptive mechanism in society that helps us to get over the rough spaces as we move from one era to another. The family is a setting in which we can create the other, the different, the alternative. It is both the adaptor and creator of the new."

Let me give you an example of how changes in familial life can have impacts on society. Many women, including those who do not view themselves as active feminists, want to be more than simple mothers and housekeepers. As more and more women become active in the community and/or have entered the labour force, fundamental changes have taken place in personnel policies, in the ways business is carried out, and who carries out what.

Men are also questioning their tra'itional roles. Many are asking: "Am I only a worker? Is there more to life for me too?" This questioning has led to new attitudes towards famil.al life. There are probably many men at this meeting today who are washing dishes and sharing many other household and child-caring chores. Men are now becoming more than part-time fathers and husbands. Men are, as many corporations know, not so eager to take job promotions that would involve moving to another city and disrupting their family life. So, we can see that out of the questions men and women are now asking in the familial context, social and economic change come.

The work that goes on in the family and community also has important impacts on society. This is another interest of the Institute. We call it the informal economy. In part, it includes all the household activities, such as meal preparation, laundering, and care of the children. The informal economy also includes community, non-profit enterprises; most voluntary groups, such as the United Way, service clubs and blood donor organizations; and the trading, bartering, and exchanging of goods and services among friends and neighbors, among small businesses and other enterprises.

All of these informal activities have important economic functions, even though they do not usually involve money transactions. However, since informal activities are difficult to measure in terms of traditional economic indicators, economists fail to take them into account when they analyze the state of "the economy" and establish public policies. The result is that the current cash economy is misperceived as being the whole economy. This may be why we are not getting effective remedies for our economic crisis from economic theorists, programmers and policy makers. When they ignore the mass of economic activities performed by the person, the family, and the community, they are only playing with half the deck.

It has been estimated that if a cash value were placed on the activities carried out in the domestic and community sectors, it would amount to about 80 to 100 per cent of the value of GNP. When you realize that the whole economy of Canada is almost twice as big as the formally recognized one, you see that we have a much larger range of economic territory out of which a new and stronger society can be built.

By learning more about the informal economy and developing policies aimed at encouraging its growth and development, we may be able to resolve what is being called the crisis of the welfare state. Our traditional economic, social and political institutions are being strained to the breaking point by galloping budgets and increasing demands for services, jobs, housing, and so on. All of these are vital human requirements. But our present framework cannot handle them. New frameworks are required, including for starters how we perceive and think about work. Our prevailing concept of work, which is confined to those activities conducted within the "labour market", is too restrictive, and may be one of the root causes of our economic and social problems.

What would happen if we broadened the concept of work, so that it included all the activities within the informal economy? We might better recognize the need to redistribute income in new ways and to develop new forms of meaningful economically and socially productive activity. Perhaps, we may see the necessity to introduce a guaranteed annual income scheme that could form an economic foundation for all the activities performed in the informal economy and as the foundation for the formal economy. Your response to this idea may be that the cost of such a basic income scheme is

too high. But, in fact, reshaping what we now have, and linking it to broader and healthier conceptions of useful work, could ultimately be socially and economically more beneficial than unemployment insurance and other patch work allowances now are and possibly even less expensive.

We need to start thinking about new ways of distributing income and work because it seems improbable that enough "jobs", in what has been the normal sense, are going to be created in the formal economy to solve our unemployment problems. We are entering a post-industrial era where more and more people will be replaced with micro-electronic technology, such as robots, in the manufacturing and service sectors of the formal economy. Our social security system as now shaped and understood is going to experience unbearable pressures if we don't devise alternative modes of work and income distribution. Let us remember, even with widespread robotic applications, the aggregate national wealth remains, so that the long term issues are new modes of redistribution, work, and life meaning.

I said at the beginning of my talk that many people are developing a variety of strategies to cope with the economic crisis. They are not waiting for some leader or institution to tell them what to do. They are developing new patterns of life and work for the post-industrial society. This can be seen, for example, in the ways people are becoming more self-reliant in terms of their own personal and familial life.

People are growing their own food, and are setting up retail food co-operatives. There are increasing numbers of barter exchange systems

sprouting up in communities. People are developing craft skills, and moving away from mass-produced goods to custom-produced items. This can be seen at all the Christmas craft sales that are happening right now in cities all over Canada.

People are engaging in more do-it-yourself activities at home. The motivation for these activities goes beyond building something for yourself for $10, rather than paying someone to do it for $125. What people are essentially doing is taking the responsibility for their lives back into their own hands.

People are also developing co-operative modes of work. Friends and neighbors once again are increasingly helping each other, such as in carrying out house renovations. There is a revitalization of familial interdependence taking place in communities. People are re-discovering the joys and satisfaction that can be gained by working and carrying an enterprise and business face-to-face with persons they know and trust. There are some signs that urban growth has slowed, in some areas stopped and that a revitalization of smaller towns and rural areas is gradually picking up.

One of the important results of this re-development of interdependence among people in communities is that new forms of familial life are developing. We are seeing new patterns of the extended family arising and a broadening of social supports, which reach beyond blood relatives.

This is true of myself. My brothers don't live in Ottawa. The men whom I count on when I need to resolve difficulties are my close, intimate

friends. They are, in effect, my brothers. They are part of my extended family.

As we learn more and more to develop interpersonal support systems and as we create new modes of work based on co-operative relationships, innovative uses of the new technologies, the pressures on our social institutions will decrease.

There is a clear need to establish a more appropriate balance in our lives and in our social, political, and economic relationships between our capacity to provide for ourselves and our need to rely on external structures and institutions.

As I said, many families and individual persons are already working towards this goal. What we require now are economic and social development policies that will support the actions of these people and encourage others to become more self-reliant. There is much to be done by business and government to cultivate new patterns of work and social support systems.

For example, investment policies could be devised to maximize the development of small-scale, labour-intensive enterprises in communities, both commercial enterprises and non-profit, social service enterprises. This could assist in resolving, to a great extent, our unemployment pressure.

The challenge we are facing, as we head into the opening days of the post-industrial society of the 1980s, is to rebuild our familial and community

relationships, and integrate them into new forms of economic and social development.

It is being said that we live in a time of crisis. I think the best way to describe our situation is to use the Chinese word for crisis, which means "dangerous opportunity". Perhaps the time has come to reassess the prevailing picture of doom and gloom, and to recognize that our society is not merely breaking down, it is also - and more importantly - breaking through all of the traditional assumptions about living and work, and moving us into another era.

New options are opening up to revitalize our society and our familial life. What we need to do is seek to understand the patterns of change and work with them to reconstruct the immediate world about, that each and all of us live in and share together.

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